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SUBJECT: Saudi Media: Recent commentaries show environment  
continues to open slowly

¶1. Summary and comment. Local Saudi print media has recently favored regional issues concerning local topics over international issues. Editorials and commentaries from January to May 2008 have largely focused on three major Saudi issues: (1) debate on the activities and role of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV or the Commission; also referred to as 'mutuaween' or religious police); (2) King Abdullah's call for interfaith dialogue, and (3) price hikes and inflation. Reports and commentaries on high-interest issues of Iraq and the Middle East Peace Process were dwarfed by the above-mentioned domestic issues. Increasingly open discussion on contentious local issues suggests a positive trend in press freedom and use of the media to promote dialogue on sensitive issues. End summary and comment.

Editorials and Commentaries: Local Issues  
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¶2. CPVPV: The mutuaween.

Moderate Okaz (3/20) defended the CPVPV's role and its efforts in protecting the community: "The commission has earned considerable trust of the people. Individual errors should not extend to the whole work of the Commission. Any debate or discussion raised should aim to constructively criticize." An op-ed in moderate Al-Watan (1/31) criticized the CPVPV President for defending Commission members' mistakes, because the President considered the Commission "above suspicion." The op-ed criticized Commission members for pushing people to pray while they do not initiate prayer. It concluded, "The strategies of the Commission contribute to placing psychological barriers between the Commission and the people." Another Al-Watan op-ed (4/8) stated "the latest errors [by the CPVPV] resulting in many deaths will not end as CPVPV members are human beings and are not infallible, and not above the law." An op-ed in English-language Saudi Gazette (5/6) offered, "If the Commission hopes to minimize the negative publicity it has received in the past years or so, then perhaps its policies and procedures, especially when dealing with non-Muslims, should be clearly defined." Comment: The Saudi media is divided over the role of the CPVPV in society, and actively debates this role in the media. The debate is often linked to several high profile cases in which alleged suspects have been harmed or killed as a result of CPVPV members' actions. The existence of this debate is a significant step forward in the media. End comment.

¶3. Interfaith dialogue: King's message disseminated.

King Abdullah's Interfaith Dialogue initiative has won widespread praise throughout the print media. Influential, conservative Al-Riyadh (3/26) in "Interfaith Dialogue ... not Wars" wrote, "King Abdullah's call for interfaith dialogue meets logic and interests of all people. Logic has defeated wars...meetings between scholars and intellectuals create opportunities for coexistence." Moderate Al-Jazira's (3/27) "Yes, to Dialogue" stated, "People are still threatened by the danger of wars and armed strife under new names;

the latest is the war on terrorism. Interfaith dialogue will make others view the reality of Islam. Dialogue is a significant principle in all aspects of life." Comment: The media is increasingly being used effectively to communicate the King's initiatives of moderation and tolerance; these initiatives are never criticized in the media. End comment.

#### 14. Price hikes and inflation: Dominating news columns.

Pan-Arab Al-Hayat columnist Ahmed Al-Shahlan commented that low- and middle-income families in Saudi Arabia have not yet benefited from high oil prices. He said a recent King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology study showed middle class families in Saudi Arabia suffer, unable to meet the [financial] requirements of housing, education, health, and other expenses (3/9). Some writers of Al-Horeya and Al-Tommar liberal websites criticized a recently announced five per cent inflation allowance for government employees as "insufficient". A new website, [www.moqqata.com](http://www.moqqata.com), is dedicated to publishing the names of commodity traders who allegedly hike prices, and asks site visitors to boycott them. Al-Riyadh highlights recent price hikes on its front page, almost daily. Comment: This issue is so contentious it resulted in a temporary ban on live call-in broadcast programming because of a negative debate sparked by this issue a few months ago. The debate over whether Saudi families derive any benefits from the recent surge in oil prices is clearly a hot button issue. It is so sensitive that we have not seen any commentary in the local dailies, only straight news reporting. End comment.

#### Regional Issues

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15. Iraq. Two noteworthy commentaries appeared recently in moderate, high-circulation Al-Jazira (3/14): "After Five Years of War" this dangerous adventure has created a breeding ground for terrorists. The decision for war was an erroneous one that has exposed the region to more dangers. War creates enemies more than friends." A follow-on article, "Was it the Right Decision?" (3/21) commented, "Presidents Bush's last speech proves that American vision over war in Iraq is suffering a crisis. War has destroyed Iraq and has resulted in severe consequences."

16. Middle East Peace Process. Moderate Al-Jazira's "Israel and the Creation of Extremism" (3/02) stated "Israel's current crimes have directly contributed to ignite the fire of extremism in the region. Israel should not be excluded as a significant contributor to spreading the culture of killing and hatred. Israeli practices have paved the way for extremists, and created their justifications for existence and spread."

17. Conclusion and comment. While Saudi commentaries continue to focus on national issues of interest and repeat locally popular sentiments on the regional issues, we are seeing slow progress towards opening debate in the media. Saudi media practitioners know there are still 'red lines' not to be crossed, but the lines are being pushed back. Debate on the CPVPV is a relatively new frontier for the media, and the debate is active. While the media is used effectively to promote government programs of moderation, we are not seeing any criticism of the King's dialogue initiative. We suspect this is a firm 'red line' not to be crossed. The issue of price hikes and inflation is probably the most heated issue currently in the news, and while this issue is not generating commentary (another likely 'red line'), it is a near-daily reminder to government officials of how inflation is affecting the struggling working class. Long criticized as a censored media environment, this evidence suggests Saudi media continues to take slow yet steady steps towards opening. End conclusion and comment.

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